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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000866

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/24/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: MALIKI VISIT POSITIVE, BUT INCREMENTAL APPROACH  
LACKS URGENCY

REF: A. (A) DAMASCUS 865  
[1](#)B. (B) DAMASCUS 836  
[1](#)C. (C) DAMASCUS 756

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: No one here is saying "modus vivendi," but PM Maliki's August 19-22 visit was notable for top-level SARG and Iraqi commitments on security, energy, and political cooperation. Behind the scenes, the Iraqis strongly suspect that the August 14 attacks on Qahtaniya and Al Jazeera originated from Syrian territory. Maliki pressed Assad for tougher measures against terrorist groups in Syria, but as far as we know, he did not confront Syrian officials with information about the Ninewa attacks. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) OVERVIEW: Iraqi PM Maliki arrived in Damascus the evening of August 19 against a backdrop of Syrian media reports highlighting Maliki's domestic difficulties, in contrast to the coverage of the SARG's generosity in hosting Iraqi refugees and its ongoing efforts to clamp down on the border. The Iraqi delegation made arrival statements conditioning any oil deals on Syrian security cooperation. Though the rhetoric from both sides signaled tough bargaining ahead, public statements from both delegations became more congenial as the visit wore on.

[1](#)3. (S) In addition to PM Maliki's official meetings with President Assad (readout below), Maliki met PM Otri, VP Shara, and FM Mouallem, while the delegations of ministers held working-level talks on security, energy, economic, water, and trade issues. According to the Iraqi Embassy, Maliki disappeared after an August 21 dinner with Arab diplomats for a long one-on-one with Syrian National Security Advisor Kheirbek and possibly other Syrian Military Intelligence officials. (Comment: Maliki lived in exile here during Saddam's reign and probably is no stranger to the secret ways of Syrian intelligence. End comment.)

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[1](#)4. (S) DOWN TO BUSINESS: BASHAR AND MALIKI AGREE VISIT MUST SUCCEDE: According to our readout from the Iraqi Embassy

here (STRICTLY PROTECT) PM Maliki met President Assad August 21 for a several-hour session of frank conversations, including a one-on-one meeting that lasted almost an hour. Assad set a positive tone, telling Maliki that "the visit must be successful" in opening the doors to all areas of cooperation, "especially security." Syrian and Iraqi security were interdependent, he continued. Syria recognized its strong interests in improving security conditions in Iraq because the "chaos" could spill over the borders at any time. The SARG therefore wanted to do all it could to increase security and political stability in Iraq for the sake of both their peoples.

15. (S) Assad warned the U.S. would make the Iraqi government the "scapegoat" for any failure in Iraq. Syria, he said, was not conspiring to undermine the PM Maliki's government, but the SARG would continue discussions with all Iraqi parties to call for moderation, restraint, and unity. Syria was ready to assist Iraq in any field, especially in economy and security, because these were the basis of good relations. Assad said a number of Arab countries had targeted Iraq for terrorist attack, and he called for specific programs to establish security cooperation, along the lines of Syria's 2004 counterterrorism agreement with Turkey.

16. (S) MALIKI: WE NEED COOPERATION AGAINST TERROR GROUPS IN SYRIA: PM Maliki agreed with Assad that the visit had to succeed. Instability in Iraq had affected all of Iraq's neighbors, and Iraq had been on the brink of civil war during the period following the terrorist attacks on Samarra. Maliki said he had emphasized the need to expand security cooperation in his visits to Iran and Turkey. In this regard, he believed "Iraq needs Syria," which had provided refuge for Iraqis during Saddam's regime and remained a

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refuge for many Iraqis now. Citing the National Islamic Front in Syria's efforts to organize a conference against the Iraqi government, Maliki said many of these Iraqis in Syria were working against the Iraqi political process. (Note: Our sources tell us the SARG is prevented an Iraqi opposition from holding a conference during the August 8-9 Border Security Working Group experts meeting in Damascus. We have heard but not confirmed rumors that other Iraqi opposition meetings have been "cancelled.")

17. (S) We hope Syria will not be a "battlefield against Iraq," Maliki continued, adding that his government was prepared to engage in a "joint study" of security cooperation. (Comment: According to the Iraqi Embassy here, FM Zebari strongly suspects that some of the attackers and vehicles which conducted the August 14 attacks in Ninewa crossed from Syrian territory into the Iraqi border town of Sinjar. We have no information that the Iraqi side confronted SARG officials with these suspicions. End Comment)

18. (S) Maliki touched on the political process in Iraq and said his government's reconciliation efforts were the only way to achieve stability and security. Iraq and Syria had to cooperate against terrorism, and this cooperation must include action against terrorist organizations in Syria.

19. (S/NF) Assad replied that the principal danger for Iraqi and Syrian societies is extremism. Though their numbers have increased, they do not exceed thousands, "and it is within the capability of the security agencies to put an end to them." But the true nature of the problem, Assad explained, is the "culture of extremism" that results from the large number of Iraqis in Syria "suffering from depravation." Extremist organizations were able to exploit their condition. Maliki replied that extremism reflected more than need, pointing out that many terrorists came from Saudi Arabia. He called on Assad to replace Syrian Imams who continued to justify terrorist attacks in Iraq in their

sermons.

¶10. (S/NF) The Iraqi Embassy said Maliki pressed the SARG to do more on the issue of foreign fighters and heard some positive noises. He also got some push back that Iraq should also focus on the source countries -- namely, Saudi, Yemen, Egypt and Algeria.

¶11. (C) SPECIFIC AGREEMENTS: The Iraqi and Syrian delegations announced the signature of MOUs on security and economic cooperation. These included:

-- linking the Iraqi Akkas field with the gas complex in Dayr al-Zawr through pipelines to be built and completed "as soon as possible."

-- undertaking efforts to "rehabilitate" the oil pipeline between Kirkuk and Banyas, exchange oil products, and establish a mechanism to oversee these projects.

-- expanding economic cooperation by developing border outlets and free-trade zones, and by facilitating the movement of Syrian goods and products into Syria. They also agreed to hold trade fairs in the two countries and develop financial and customs cooperation.

-- activation of bilateral technical committees for the management of water resources.

-- Iraqi appreciation for Syrian efforts to support Iraqi refugees and an expression of its readiness to provide support to the SARG for health and education services.

-- Establishment of a security liaison and activation of counterterrorism cooperation, to include discussions on extradition.

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¶12. (S) BUT SOME DISAGREEMENT: The Iraqi Embassy suggested that the Syrians "were focused" on the economic side of affairs, looking for anything they could get in that area from the visit. (Comment: this may have been Iraqi spin on the value of what they have to offer and the Syrians impure business motives. End Comment) .

¶13. (S) The only area of disagreement was the SARG's refusal to include an Iraqi reference to "ex-military officers fomenting violence in Iraq" in the joint communique. The Iraqis noted with some satisfaction, however, that President Assad's August 21 press statement and the communique included a denunciation of terrorist attacks against Iraqi citizens, government facilities, and religious shrines.

¶14. (S) SARG officials were on their best behavior, Iraqi Embassy sources commented, with only VP Shara'a setting a discordant note by insisting that Hareth al-Dari "was working for democracy and political stability in Iraq." Iraqi Embassy sources concluded there were many nice words from the discussions, but the proof will be in the implementation. This will be hard given the lack of trust between the two sides, they added.

¶15. (C) ATMOSPHERICS: While Maliki stayed as Assad's guest in Presidential quarters, the SARG lodged the rest of the delegation at the downtown Meridian Hotel. One journalist covering the visit described the lobby scene as "frantic," with Iraqi officials meeting at all hours with a steady stream of visiting Iraqi contacts from Syria, Europe, and other countries.

¶16. (C) The somewhat seedy atmosphere did not prevent Iraqi and Syrian officials from conducting a good deal of diplomatic and other business, however. "Poor (Iraqi Oil Minister) Sharistani," our press contact commented, "having to walk eyes down past the working girls in the bar and

lobby," while Syrian officials and Arab diplomats flowed in and out for meetings, with very little security control over access. The Iraqis, added another press contact, seemed to enjoy the freedom to walk freely, visit book stores, and shop.

¶17. (C) As previewed in Ref A, business contacts were upbeat about the overall positive tone of the visit and the possibility of expanding economic cooperation. They cautioned, however, there remains a lot of work to be done. One energy executive told us the renovation of the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline could be completed within two years if there was a genuine desire by both sides to deal with the technical and security challenges. Another energy sector contact explained that the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline was, in fact, actually two pipelines. One pipeline is currently operational, from pumping station number two near Dayr al Zayr to the refineries in Homs. The second pipeline, from Kirkuk to Banyas, is not currently functioning. He believed the two pipelines could be renovated and made operational relatively inexpensively, without "major" investment.

¶18. (C) In general, our energy sector contacts surmise that Syria's greater interest lies in a new gas pipeline that would be developed bringing gas from the Al Akkas field in Iraq to Syria -- and especially in a link with the new Arab Gas pipeline or potentially to the old Conoco Phillips gas plant that is currently not operating at full capacity. Royal Dutch Shell and Total FinaELF are widely believed to be poised in Eastern Syria to heavily invest in Western Iraqi gas.

¶19. (C) We heard several dissenting views about the whether Maliki's visit will yield concrete results. One Damascus-based Arab journalist covering the visit for Western news agency scoffed at the possibility of any real improvement in Iraqi-Syrian relations. ("No one from my home office clamoring for my article on the visit, he said.") Another Syrian journalist told us he remained pessimistic

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about any change in the political realities that were preventing Syria from benefiting from the huge export market of Iraq. He suggested many Syrians still believe Syria must exert its influence with certain parties (including Baathists) in Iraq to forge a political solution and create the stability needed for successful economic collaboration. In his mind Maliki was politically weak and any economic agreements being signed by Syria-Iraq were by extension weak as well.

¶20. (C) Our sources credit FM Mouallem and Deputy Minister of Interior (and head of the GID) Mohammed Mansoura as playing a critical role in preparations for and execution of the Maliki visit. Mansoura, who co-chaired the recent Border Security Working Group, in Damascus was especially instrumental in keeping the SARG engaged with the Iraqis -- particularly on the Security side (Ref B). Sources say Mouallem and Mansoura deserve helped establish and sustain the positive tone of the Maliki visit, which we see as another indicator of their efforts to promote incremental steps toward better relations with Iraq (Ref C).

¶21. (S) COMMENT: Bashar Assad's personal order that the Maliki's visit must succeed represents another signal of Syrian interest in incremental steps toward better relations with Iraq. Once loathe to the mere thought of hosting Maliki without prior agreement on the Syrian vision of Iraqi reconciliation, the SARG has offered a commitment to security cooperation without political conditions. The SARG has already named its security liaison and claims it is clamping down on the border. We fully expect the SARG to point to the visit as another sign that it is actively and constructively engaging without any acknowledgment from the U.S.

¶22. (S) COMMENT CONT: To the extent that there were

announced deliverables, Maliki can claim a modicum of success. Few observers here believe, however, that the establishment of a security liaison or renewing of commitments to oil and gas projects, while positive steps with potential, can make a significant, near-term contribution to Iraqi security. In that sense, Maliki's visit here may have been a missed opportunity to confront Assad more forcefully on foreign fighters and rendering high-ranking Iraqi Baath officials in Syria.

CORBIN